

Linkage between political parties and NGOs in Latvia

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INTRODUCTION

Transition to competitive political regimes in Eastern Europe has raised numerous normative and empirical issues. One of them concerns a linkage between “political society” and “civil society”.

In its crudest form, one could equate political society with political parties and office holders who are members of these parties. Civil society, in turn, can be conceived of as a variety of non-governmental groups concerned with issues directly or indirectly related to policy making.

Based on the experience of advanced democracies, it is believed that democracy is closely linked to the existence of a vibrant civil society that influences decision making in the respective country. However, this linkage can be seen as a function of exchange between parties and NGOs.

Despite profound changes in the strategies and organizational appearance of political parties since the World War II, the basic characteristic of political parties has remained unaffected – parties still strive for political power to decisively influence decision making. If one concedes to this observation, it follows that, in a political democracy, parties are *inter alia* concerned with mobilization of voter support. That, in turn, implies that parties – as rational actors – are encouraged to cooperate with the NGOs that can provide most resources for voter mobilization. However, these resources appear to be rather diverse.

In the era of mass communication and televised election campaigns, one of the most important resources is money and other material resources. It may well be possible that some NGOs possess high mobilization potential of their members and are capable of delivering votes in a manner that was characteristic of machine politics in the USA in 19th and 20th century. Thirdly, NGOs often possess expertise in a field of policy making, thus they may contribute to shaping programmatic stances of a party. Fourth, certain NGOs may have gained high reputation due to their agenda and activities and their association with a certain party may also boost the latter’s support. Fifth, some NGOs may be able to apply sanctions against government and other policy making institutions (strikes, demonstrations etc.) thereby undermining the positions of governing political organizations.

Based on these considerations, one could hypothesize that cooperation between political parties and non-governmental organizations will be more developed and closer if resources at the disposal of the latter are larger. This appears to be particularly relevant in situations when ties of NGOs to parties do not have a lengthy history and political democracy is a recent introduction or re-introduction after a longer period of non-democratic regime.

In light of these general considerations, the aim of this paper is to explore resourcefulness of Latvian NGOs and to analyze relations between them and political parties in the context of NGO resources. The paper is based on several surveys carried out in 1999 and 2000 as well as official statistics, legislative acts and interviews with a number of representatives of leading Latvian political parties.

PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS IN LATVIA: LAWS, NUMBERS AND TRENDS

The Law on Public Organizations and Their Associations was adopted by the Latvian parliament in December 1992. This law regulates activities of non-

governmental organizations and a number of aspects of political party functioning¹. In particular, this describes registration requirements of NGOs – program and statutes adopted at the founding meeting of the organization, compliance of program with the Latvian legislation. Natural persons of at least 16 years of age can become members of NGOs. There is no minimum number of persons to establish an NGO (this does not apply to political parties, for founding of which support of at least 200 adult citizens is necessary).

The rather liberal approach to establishing and registering an NGO has been conducive to a growing number of these organizations:

Number of public organizations (as of June 15, 2002)

| Year | Registered | Alive |
|--------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 1990 | 1 | 1 |
| 1991 | 52 | 51 |
| 1992 | 17 | 17 |
| 1993 | 963 | 921 |
| 1994 | 576 | 552 |
| 1995 | 468 | 455 |
| 1996 | 731 | 700 |
| 1997 | 610 | 596 |
| 1998 | 664 | 651 |
| 1999 | 672 | 656 |
| 2000 | 897 | 889 |
| 2001 | 767 | 759 |
| 2002 | 404 | 404 |
| Total | 6822 | 6652 |

Source: Lursoft IT, LTD

One should not, however, overestimate the level of activity of all NGOs. It is seems appropriate to assume that slightly more than half of all NGOs are active as the number of organizations submitting their annual financial declarations oscillates between 55 and 60%².

As the following table shows, there is a notable diversity of NGOs by format (as stipulated by the legislation). It must be stressed that two thirds of all organizations are registered in the capital city of Riga while only 40% of residents are concentrated here.

Variety of NGOs in Latvia (as of June 15, 2002)

| Kind of organization | Number |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Public organizations | 4113 |
| Sports organizations | 1193 |
| Open public funds | 925 |
| Trade unions | 125 |
| Professional associations | 96 |
| Associations of sports organizations | 82 |
| Political parties | 61 |

¹ Several other legislative acts regulate party finance and election campaigning.

² NVO sektors Latvijā. 2000; 20.lpp.

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| Association of public organizations | 43 |
| Professional creative organization | 14 |
| TOTAL | 6652 |

Source: Lursoft IT, LTD

Membership

According to a 1999 public opinion survey, 22% of population have a membership in any voluntary organization, 14% are active in their participation and 3% have a position within organization. More than one third of all involved in the organizations are members of trade unions, 21% - those of sports clubs and 15% – those of cultural, musical, dancing or theatre societies.

There is a fairly strong tendency for younger people (15-24 y.o.) to get involved in NGO activities. Also, higher level of education and employment in the public sector tend to be better predictors of NGO members.

According to a survey commissioned by the NGO Center in Riga, more than 43% of NGOs have 10-30 members. 14% of NGOs have less than 10 members and only 4% have more than 500 members. This signals about a rather fragmented NGO sector.

Funding

In a 1999 survey of NGOs, 60% of respondents claimed their yearly budget did not exceed 5000 Lats (USD 8200). 27% of NGOs survived on a yearly budget of 100-1000 Lats. Only 3% of NGOs admitted that their yearly budget exceeded 50'000 Lats (USD 82'000)³.

What appears to be an indirect indicator of dispersion of financial resources is the fact that nearly 70% of NGOs do not have paid staff. 14% of NGOs claim to have one paid staff member and another 10% say they have 2-3 paid staff members⁴.

Information about the sources of NGO funding is incomplete and somewhat contradictory as the role of foreign donors is estimated with notable differences: 18-80% of yearly income in the late 1990s. What is clear, however, is that the amounts provided by foreign donors are decreasing, which undercuts the activities of many NGOs as they have been unable to find and utilize alternative sources of funding⁵. Some 20% of NGOs say they have been able to attract state or municipal funding but the actual amounts are unknown. Membership fees appear to be the prime source of funding for most NGOs while the importance of donations of local origins seems to be growing.

NGOS IN THE POLICY MAKING PROCESS

Latvia emerges as a party-based democracy. The country has adopted a parliamentary system with formal parliamentary supremacy over other branches of government. Moreover, the parliament is elected by the system of proportional representation on the basis of candidate lists. Only registered political organizations

³ NVO sektors Latvijā. 2000; 27.lpp.

⁴ NVO sektors Latvijā. 2000; 22.lpp.

⁵ Biseniece, Līva. *Pilsoniskās sabiedrības attīstība Latvijā: Ārvalstu finansētāju ieguldījums nevalstisko organizāciju attīstībā*. Valmiera, 2000.

(parties) are allowed to submit the lists. Hence, the government is also composed of party representatives and a rare exception would be a non-partisan minister. Many other positions in state agencies are filled on the basis of partisanship.

This description points to a central role of political parties in the decision making process in Latvia. However, the degree of cooperation of NGOs and parties appears to be far from strong.

A September 2000 survey demonstrated that more than half of Latvian parliamentarians believed that ordinary citizens are willing to participate in and contribute to the decision making process. However, only 27% thought that the citizens are able to affect decision making in the parliament, 3% thought it was possible at the governmental level but none of the parliamentary respondents believed citizens could affect decisions of single ministries.

Some 70% parliamentarians asserted that they frequently consult with stakeholders and NGOs on a particular decision. However, they clearly separated trade unions and industrial associations from other NGOs: some 75% would rarely or never consult with trade unions while more than 70% of parliamentarians would frequently or always confer with industrial associations.

Consequently, parliamentarians attached a rather low importance to NGOs in the decision making process: nearly 60% of them said that industrial organizations had little or no influence on decision making and more than 90% said the same with regard to other NGOs. Moreover, parliamentarians did not view a cooperation with NGOs as a way to improve the results of decision making.

Therefore, it is hardly a surprise that major parties a very few instances of institutionalized cooperation with NGOs. It seems that all of them are related to cooperation with trade unions, which are largest NGOs in the country in terms of membership. Some political organizations may have closer ties to NGOs with similar agenda but these ties appear to be not formalized.

The picture appears different from the viewpoint of upper middle level bureaucrats (directors of departments). Similarly to parliamentarians, they have a low trust in the ability of ordinary citizens to influence decision making in the country. Yet, more than 50% of respondents in this group claimed to consult with industrial associations and other NGOs on both defining policy priorities and finding alternative solutions. Nevertheless, these consultations appear to be *pro forma* as more than 60% of respondents thought industrial associations have little or no impact on decision making and nearly 90% said the same about other NGOs. Many of the bureaucrats surveyed complained about a low level of competence and expertise of NGOs, which may partly explain the outcome of consultations.

From a different perspective, the NGO Center in Riga claims that some 500 NGOs are involved in advocacy and policy making, which is less than 10% of the total. Most of them are industrial associations providing their input for drafting legislation and similar activities⁶. In most cases, cooperation with state institutions tends to be irregular, short-lived and informal. There are few instances of institutionalized cooperation between NGOs and the state and most of them are concentrated in the sphere of economics. Only a few months ago, the State Chancery invited a representative of the NGO Center to participate the final stages of discussions about draft decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers on a weekly basis.

⁶ *NVO sektors Latvijā. 2000. Rīga, 2001. P.10-11*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Latvia has a parliamentary regime where political parties play a key role in decision making and state administration. Proportional representation has given rise to numerous parties outside the parliament and a notable number of political organizations represented in the parliament. Coupled with a liberal legislation, this has created favorable conditions for a steadily rising number of non-governmental organizations.

However, the cooperation between parties and NGOs is rather weak for a number of reasons. Generally speaking, NGOs in Latvia are rather small in terms of membership. Their financial and also intellectual resources tend to be notably restricted, therefore, their potential to mobilize segments of society appears to be equally insignificant.

Trade unions and industrial associations emerge as major exceptions to this general observation. Hence, their deeper involvement in the decision making process. However, even that does not guarantee their voice to be heard. Reasons for this weak influence require further studies of the whole decision making process in Latvia taking into account all relevant actors.